

Cover by Tom O'Sullivan

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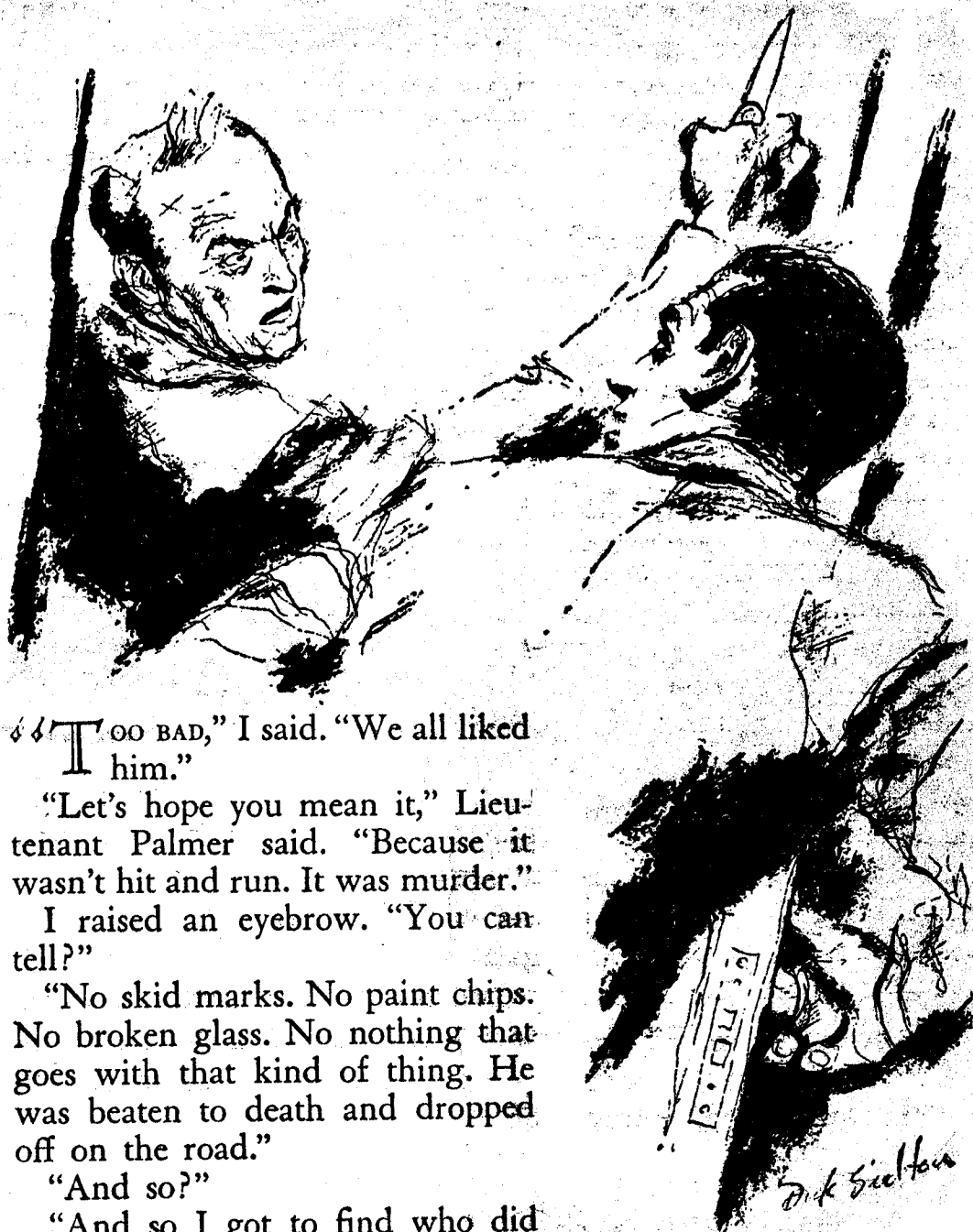
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The Partners

*Got to be careful whom you kill.
Could be you need a book-
keeper more than a partner.*

BY JACK RITCHIE



“**T**OO BAD,” I said. “We all liked him.”

“Let’s hope you mean it,” Lieutenant Palmer said. “Because it wasn’t hit and run. It was murder.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You can tell?”

“No skid marks. No paint chips. No broken glass. No nothing that goes with that kind of thing. He was beaten to death and dropped off on the road.”

“And so?”

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it and why. This is one of the places I look." His eyes went over the three of us. "You three own this big, swanky nightclub?"

"That's right," I said. "Partners. Eddie Fletcher, Louie Nicolle and me. Danny Neil."

Lieutenant Palmer was a sandy-haired man with shrewd blue eyes, "What was Harold Romaine around here?"

"He was our bookkeeper," Louie Nicolle said. Louie's short heavy body was wedged between the arms of the gray leather chair. The rings on his fingers glistened as he brought the scotch and soda to his lips.

Lieutenant Palmer smiled thinly. "I always got my suspicions about bookkeepers. There could be something that smells in that direction."

Eddie Fletcher toyed nervously with his cigarette case. "Nothing at all there. He was as honest as they come."

Palmer still smiled. "You don't mind if I have your books checked? I might find that one or all three of you had a good motive for getting rid of him."

I returned his smile. "Not at all, Lieutenant. Any time."

"Maybe it was someone in his personal life," Louie said.

Palmer closed his notebook. "We're checking."

"Poor Harry," I said. "Any relatives?"

"None that we know of except his father. I already talked to the

old boy, but he wasn't much help. He's not quite all in order between the ears."

Palmer put the notebook in his pocket. "About those books. I'll have somebody sent over later today. I like to be thorough." He opened the door and paused. "By the way, where were the three of you early this morning? Say between two and seven?"

"The three of us were playing poker," Eddie said. "Right here in this club until nearly eight."

"That's nice," Palmer said, nodding his head. "And probably not one of you even left to go to the can. Good bladders." He waggled a few fingers in goodbye. "I'll be back."

Eddie went to the corner bar and made himself another stiff drink. "You sure it won't show up in the books?" he asked.

"No," I said. "If Harry could do anything, he could keep books. It won't show."

Louie spoke around his cigar. "How much do you think he took us for before we caught on?"

"It's hard to say," I said. "Not less than twenty-five G's. Could be as much as fifty."

"The bastard," Louie growled.

Eddie turned to me. "You could of made it look better."

I shrugged my shoulders. "You guys were all hot and bothered for a rush job," I said. "Besides, it was getting daylight and I had to get rid of the body."

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"I wonder if he really spent it," Louie said. "You think maybe it's stashed away somewhere?"

"You heard him keep squealing that it was the horses," I said. "We'll just have to believe that."

Maxie, the head waiter, knocked on the door and poked his head in. "Some old gent wants to see you. Any one of you. I think he's Harry's old man."

"Let's see what he looks like," I said.

Maxie had a surprised expression on his face when he came back with Harry's father. He slid the .45 across the desk to me.

I extracted the full chip from the automatic and then looked at Harry's father. Mr. Romaine was a small, frail man with silver hair and blue eyes that blinked often.

He looked about the room. "Fine," he said. "It would have been fine. All three of you here."

"All right, Pop," I said. "Tell us all about it."

His wild eyes met mine. "I don't know which one of you it was," he said in a high uncertain voice. "I don't know which one of you killed him, but I know you're all guilty."

I studied him. "Why should we be guilty of anything?"

"Because you knew what Harry was doing," he said. "He told me all about it when he thought you knew." He smiled slyly. "But I didn't tell the lieutenant. I want to take care of this myself."

He looked down at the gun on my desk. "I'll use something else," he said. "I'll use something else to kill all three of you."

I got to my feet. "You're going home now, Pop, and get some rest. You'll feel better tomorrow." I took hold of his arm at the elbow and steered him toward the door.

Behind me Louie spoke softly. "How much was it, Pop?"

The old man twisted his head as I shoved him through the door. "Thirty-one thousand," he said, and his laugh was almost a giggle. "Thirty-one thousand dollars."

"The bastard," Louie muttered under his breath. "The dirty crooked bastard."

Outside the office we stepped aside to let Jean Taylor pass. Jean has flowing gold hair and gray eyes that remain perpetually quiet and unsurprised. She is part of the floor show and she sings songs that are as simple and restrained as she is.

She stopped to look at the old man and then at me. "Be careful with him," she said. "Don't hurt him."

I smiled. "I won't disturb a feather in his head," I said. "I'm only showing him how to find the back door." I took Harry's father into the alley and pointed him toward the street. "Run along now and get some sleep. I know it's hit you pretty hard, but don't let it give you any bad ideas."

Jean was still standing where we'd met her in the corridor when

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I came back. "What did he want?" she asked.

"Harry's father," I said. "He didn't get what he wanted."

She tilted her serious face slightly. "I'm still curious."

"Something to do with Harry," I said.

"What about Harry?"

"I guess you haven't heard yet," I said. "Harry got himself killed last night."

She looked deep into my eyes.

"Yes," I said. "Murdered." I patted her lightly on the head. "Don't take it so hard. We can always get another bookkeeper."

After we closed the club, I went to my apartment and slept until two in the afternoon. I'd just finished shaving and was using the after-shaving lotion when the buzzer sounded. I grabbed a cigarette on the way to the door.

"Come on in, Lieutenant," I said. "Care for some coffee?"

"No," Palmer said and took a seat in the arm chair. He pursed his lips for a moment before he spoke. "I came to bring you the news. Louie Nicolle got his throat cut at about eleven this morning."

I thought about it and got to my feet. "Just a second," I said. I went into the kitchen, poured myself coffee and cream and brought it back into the living room.

He watched me. "Are you sure you're interested?"

"I could cry," I said. "But not until I've had my coffee."

Palmer seemed about to continue and then it looked like he thought of something else. He cocked his head. "What happens to Louie's share of the club now?"

"It goes to Eddie and me," I said. "The setup is now fifty-fifty." I sipped the coffee. "I was sleeping alone at eleven this morning," I said. "Should I phone a lawyer?"

Slowly he unwrapped a cigar. "No, you don't need a lawyer or an alibi. We know who did it and we got a witness."

"You could have said that right at the beginning," I said.

"For some reason I like to see you worried," Palmer said. "Not that you show it, but I know it's there." He sucked on his cigar until it was lit. "Around eleven this morning, a chamber maid was at one of the linen closets in the hall near Louie's door. She saw a little old man buzz Louie's door. When Louie opened the door, the little gent whipped out a sharp knife." Palmer drew his finger across his throat. "Just like that. No fuss, no bother, no talk."

"Are you sure you don't want coffee?" I asked.

Palmer rubbed the side of his face as he watched me. "And then the little man calmly wipes his knife on Louie's shirt and quietly walks away while Louie is still kicking."

Palmer sighed. "By the time the maid believes her eyes and makes a noise, he's disappeared down the stairs and out the front door. We're

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still looking for him."

"I hope you get him, Lieutenant," I said.

"Thanks," he said dryly. "A little old man, about five foot two. Gray hair and blue eyes. Does that strike a note?"

"Nothing at all," I said.

"It was a whole melody to me," Palmer said. "Seeing as how I'd had a conversation with a man of that description just recently."

I nodded.

Palmer went on. "I went to see Harry Romaine's father. Nobody home. The door happens to be unlocked and so naturally I check for burglars. When I leave, I have a couple of old man Romaine's photographs in my pocket. The maid does a positive identification."

He crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair. "There must be something you forgot to tell me the last time we met."

"Sorry, Lieutenant. I can't think of a thing."

Palmer stared at the ceiling. "Fifty-fifty now," he said thoughtfully. He got to his feet. "Anyway, I hope you think enough of Louie to give him a nice funeral."

When he was gone, I went to the phone and called Eddie Fletcher. "Palmer been there yet?" I asked.

"No," Eddie said nervously. "What for should he want to see me?"

"Louie got his throat cut this morning," I said. "Harry's father did the job and he's still loose."

I could almost see Eddie sweating and I smiled. "Relax," I said. "The cops will get him sooner or later. In the meantime make sure you know who it is when you answer the door."

I went back into the kitchen and had some more coffee and toast. It wasn't a bad deal at that, I thought. With Louie gone, that made me about fifteen grand a year richer. The coffee tasted good.

At seven in the evening I was getting ready to go to the club when the buzzer sounded again. I started for the door and then stopped as I thought of Louie. Better to be careful than to be suddenly dead, I said to myself. I wrapped a suitcoat around my left forearm and held it near my throat as I opened the door.

For an old man, he could still move fast. If my arm hadn't been up there he would have got me. But as it was, he just sliced through the coat and nicked my hand a little.

He was pulling back for another try when I got his wrist. I pulled him into the room and twisted his arm until he sank to his knees. The knife slipped out of his grip and thudded to the rug.

I jerked him to his feet and got ready to give him a good going over. He looked at me with those mild watery eyes and I saw that he was about as far off his rocker as you could get. He didn't have enough sense left to tie his shoe

laces, and the only thing his mind was working on was the idea of killing me and Eddie.

To start off with, I let him have an easy right to the chin. He must have been weaker than I thought, because that took the light out of his eyes and he collapsed. I kicked him in the ribs as he lay on the floor, but it was unnecessary, for he was out cold.

I was reaching for the knife, when the idea flickered in my mind. I left the knife there and lit a cigarette. After a few slow puffs, I bent down again and picked the knife up, being careful not to touch the handle.

I put the knife in an empty half gallon milk bottle, wrapped that in a towel and put it in a shoe box.

Then I went into the bathroom and got a couple of sleeping tablets. I dissolved them in warm milk and waited until the old man came to. While he was still blinking, I put the glass to his lips and he drank automatically, like a child.

He got to his feet and I pushed him onto the davenport. He tried to get up, but I kept my hand on his chest until the pills took effect. When he was asleep, I left the apartment with the shoe box.

It was quiet beyond the door when I pushed the buzzer to Eddie's apartment. "It's all right," I said. "It's only me."

The door opened to the length of its chain while Eddie made absolutely sure. When he let me in,

I saw a bottle on the table and Eddie had the smell of its contents on his breath. I put the shoe box beside the bottle.

Eddie licked his lips. "I'm not coming to the club tonight. I'm staying here until they find that crazy old coot."

"Good idea," I said. "You got to be careful."

"Maybe we ought to tell Palmer that Harry's old man is out to get all of us."

"Then he'd want to know why," I said.

Eddie fidgeted and then thought of pouring himself another drink.

I waited for him to finish and to put down the glass. When Eddie's eyes shifted away from me I slammed a hard right to his chin. I was ready to do more if that wasn't enough, but Eddie dropped and lay still.

I went into the kitchen for a knife. I turned Eddie on his back, and in a moment, being careful not to get any blood on me, it was done.

I washed the knife carefully and put it back in the kitchen. Then I opened the shoebox and got out the knife. Being careful not to get my prints on it, I put some blood on the blade and put it beside Eddie. On the way downstairs, I dropped the milk bottle and the wrappings into the incinerator.

After the first floor show, I spoke to Jean. She was wearing silver lame that clung to her like a

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"Honey," I said. "Sometimes I get the feeling that I've just got to have company after we close up."

When Jean looked at you, there were times when you wondered whether she was looking deep into your mind. "Sometimes I get that feeling too," she said. She regarded me soberly. "All right," she added, "you tell me what it's going to be."

"Your last show is at one," I said. "I'll knock off around midnight and go back to my apartment to change my shirt and then I'll be at your place at about two."

She looked into the distance and then back at me. "Two hours to change a shirt?"

I quit earlier than twelve because I was getting worried that Harry's father might wake up. I got back to my apartment at eleven thirty and used plenty of caution when I opened the door. I didn't want him waiting for me with another knife. But I had nothing to worry about. He was still stretched out on the davenport, breathing like one who's deep in sleep.

I looked down at him and thought for a moment that it might be better if I got rid of him permanently, but I changed my mind. He might babble to Palmer about the thirty-one thousand, but it would be the word of a loony against mine.

I went to the phone and got in touch with Homicide and Lieutenant Palmer.

"If you're still looking for old man Romaine," I told him, "you can stop. He's here in my apartment."

Over the phone I heard the sound of chair legs scraping and I guessed my words must have made him sit up.

"Be damn careful," he said. "The guy's nuts and dangerous."

"Not right now," I said. "He's asleep."

I went to the kitchen and got a knife. I put his fingerprints on it and added a few of mine. I put the knife on a table. I got a cold wet cloth from the bathroom and used it on his face until I got him back to consciousness.

He was still groggy when Palmer came with two plainclothes men.

"There he is," I said. "I opened the door and he took a swipe at me." I pointed to the knife. "I got nicked a little and had to put him to sleep."

Romaine was handcuffed then and the two detectives had to practically carry him.

Palmer's eyes followed the departing detectives. "I'd give a lot to know how much of what he'll say will be sane." He shrugged and went to the door. "This ought to make the other half of your fifty-fifty deal calm down. He was pretty jumpy when I saw him yesterday."

"I'm sure it will," I said. "Eddie likes security."

I got to Jean's apartment as fast as I could after they'd gone.

Her gray eyes went over me and she smiled ever so slightly. "You seem pleased with yourself," she said.

"I feel like I look," I said.

I sat down while she went into the kitchenette to mix drinks. When she handed me mine, I drank deeply with satisfaction.

She sat on the hassock, watching me. "Tell me about it," she said. "I'd like to know just what it is that can make you happy."

I rattled the ice cubes in my glass and drained about half of what was left. "Harry's old man tried to kill me this morning."

"I was wondering if he would," she said.

She watched my hand as I loosened my tie.

"I took away his sticker," I said. "And turned him over to the police." I yawned. "I had a hard day, baby." I stretched out my legs. "You know, now that I think of it, Harry was kind of a queer duck too. It must run in the family. I don't think he ever even went out with dames."

"The quiet type," she said. "Sometimes they give that impression."

"And yet that quiet bastard . . ." I stopped and grinned sleepily. "How about sitting here next to me, honey?"

"And yet?" she asked, her eyes intent on my face. "What were you going to say?"

"Nothing," I said and closed my

eyes. I felt relaxed—cozy.

"And yet that quiet bastard managed to steal thirty-one thousand dollars from you. Is that what you were going to say?"

I opened my eyes. "Who have you been talking to?"

Her face looked blurred to me. "We were going to make it fifty, Danny," she said. "An even fifty thousand dollars before we left."

It seemed to take me a while to understand what she was saying. "You and Harry?"

"Me and Harry," she said. "My husband and I."

I could feel myself sweating with the effort of trying to get to my feet. I didn't make it. "That drink . . ."

"And now I have thirty-one thousand dollars," she said. "But I don't have Harry."

I tried to shake the fog out of my head, but I was doing it slowly and it didn't work at all.

"I think Harry's father had the right idea about the way to do it," Jean said quietly. "Sleeping pills are too easy for you."

I heard her get to her feet. "It's going to be you now," she said. "And then I'm going to kill Eddie."

In the wild part of my mind, that seemed funny. She was going to kill Eddie. I let the laugh come to my lips.

It stayed there until I heard her in the kitchen opening a drawer, the rattle of cutlery.

Then I stopped laughing.

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